

# HISTORIC BACKGROUND:

## *TRANSIT AND HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD GROWTH*



**T**he District of Columbia, like most cities, grew and transformed through the influence of transportation. The Nation's Capital was located at the juncture of the Potomac and Anacostia (then Eastern Branch) Rivers because the waterways were the primary mode of transportation in early American history.

With the introduction of streetcars, the city was able to expand beyond the original plan developed by Pierre L'Enfant in 1791. Between 1890 and 1940, the District experienced its most dramatic growth and most of our current neighborhoods were established during this period.

This was the era of the streetcar. Streetcar lines covered the city and provided residents of the District of Columbia their first opportunity to move away from the central city into emerging neighborhoods. At the center of each neighborhood was a central node serviced by the streetcar. These nodes included shops, apartments, houses, parks, plazas, schools and other neighborhood amenities. They evolved into a "mini-downtown" for the many different neighborhoods.

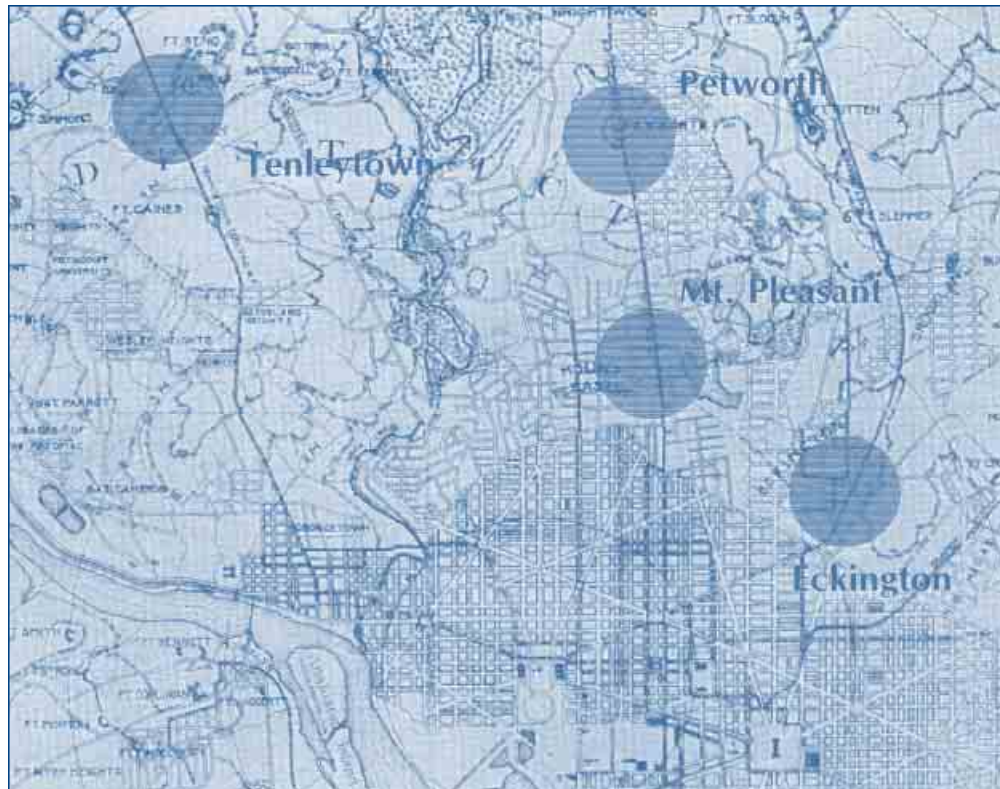


Transit was an integral part of vibrant District neighborhoods.  
(Mt. Pleasant and Lamont Street, NW—1950)  
Source: Washington DC Archives

In the 1950s and 1960s the streetcars were slowly decommissioned and replaced by rubber-tired buses. This signified the dominant role of the automobile in Washington DC that emerged beginning in the 1920's. From the 1970's through today, the private automobile has been assumed the transportation mode of choice. Personal cars meant people were no longer needed to live within walking distance of the streetcar line. They could live anywhere in the region and drive to jobs, shopping, and school. The region spread out and the neighborhood centers faded as workers, shoppers and resi-

dents abandoned them for opportunities in the newly constructed suburbs.

Opened in 1976, the Metro rail system replaced the trolley as the centralizing link to Washington DC services and neighborhoods. The past decade has seen preferences shift back toward compact neighborhoods with characteristic centers. There is rising demand once again for the opportunity to walk instead of having to use a private automobile. Urban living is becoming more popular. People list the "small town feel" of many District neighborhoods as their greatest asset. Today, the challenge is to remember what has been forgotten – that maximizing transit is essential to the appeal and identity of our neighborhoods.



A map of Washington D.C. circa 1892 indicates the emergence of the city's historic neighborhoods along major streetcar lines.  
Source: Washington DC Archives



Friendship Heights and Wisconsin Avenue trolleys  
Source: National Capital Trolley Museum

## TOD IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

15 of the 29 MetroRail stations are within or adjacent to a designated historic district. This isn't surprising considering that many of the current transit lines follow the historic routes of old streetcar lines and service the same neighborhoods that grew up around the streetcar stops.

Though historic districts carry with them special provisions for new developments and renovations, that does not mean that historic districts cannot also achieve the goals of transit-oriented development – in fact, in many ways historic neighborhoods are even better suited for TOD which aims to recreate or strengthen traditional neighborhood form and centers.

ANC commissioners, neighborhood residents and historic preservationists should adopt and pursue the design principles presented here when reviewing projects within their historic districts.